

NEWS

United States Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney, District of New Jersey
970 Broad Street, Seventh Floor
Newark, New Jersey 07102



Ralph J. Marra, Jr., Acting U.S. Attorney

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Assistant U.S. Attorney
SHANA W. CHEN
973-353-6095

houn0318.rel
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Togolese Man Admits Conspiring with His Mother and Others in Forced Labor of Young West African Women

(More)

Michael Drewniak, PAO
Public Affairs Office

973-645-2877
973-645-2888

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NEWARK – A Togolese man from East Orange pleaded guilty today in connection with the forced labor of dozens of young West African females working in hair-braiding salons in Newark and East Orange, Acting U.S. Attorney Ralph J. Marra, Jr. announced.

Dereck Hounakey, 32, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Jose L. Linares to one count of conspiring with others, including his mother, to commit forced labor, trafficking with respect to forced labor, and holding their visas and identification. Judge Linares continued the defendant's detention and scheduled sentencing for June 22.

"These young women were brought here and forced to work for free to satisfy the greedy motives of the defendants," said Marra. "The dignity and basic human rights of the victims clearly meant nothing to this defendant or his co-conspirators."

"ICE is determined to dismantle human trafficking organizations such as this one that exploit human beings solely for profit," said William Hayes, acting special agent in charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Newark. "It is unconscionable that individuals are subjected to living in a world of fear and involuntary servitude. While we cannot restore someone's dignity, we can ensure that their abusers face justice."

Hounakey has been in custody since his arrest on Sept. 6, 2007. Hounakey, a citizen of Togo, is a legal permanent resident of the United States.

At his plea hearing, Hounakey admitted that from October 2002 through September 2007, he engaged in a conspiracy to obtain the forced labor of a number of girls whom his mother, Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, had brought over from Togo with fraudulent visas.

Hounakey stated that his mother recruited individuals to pose as the relatives of the girls and that another defendant, Geoffry Kouevi, helped the girls study facts about their fake husbands and fathers in order to fraudulently obtain the visas. Once the girls entered the United States, Hounakey and his co-defendants, Afolabi and her purported husband, Lassissi Afolabi, required the girls to work at hair braiding salons for six or seven days a week, for eight to 14 hours a day, and to turn over all of their earnings, including tips, to the defendants.

Hounakey admitted that the girls were not allowed to keep their passports or identification. Nor, he said, were they allowed to leave the residences without the permission of the defendants, make any friends, or to speak to their families outside of the defendants' presence. When any of the girls broke a rule, Hounakey said they would be punished, and he admitted hitting a girl for making a telephone call without permission. Hounakey also admitted to having sex with at least several of the girls, one of whom was a minor, during the course of the conspiracy.

Trial of the remaining defendants is scheduled to commence on June 3, 2009.

Akouavi Kpade Afolabi and Lassissi Afolabi are under indictment and charged with human trafficking counts which carry maximum statutory penalties of 20 years each in some instances. In the case of Lassissi Afolabi, who is charged with aggravated sexual abuse of two of the victims, certain counts against him each carry statutory maximum penalties of life in prison. They both remain in custody pending trial. Kouevi, who is charged only with conspiracy to commit visa fraud and visa fraud, is free on bail but confined to his home with electronic monitoring pending trial.

Hounakey faces statutory maximum penalties of five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000 and mandatory restitution to the victims.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Marra credited Special Agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Newark, under the direction of Special Agents in Charge, as well as agents of the Department of Labor, Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Department of State.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Shana W. Chen and Nancy Hoppock of the Criminal Division.

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Defense Attorney: Dwight H. Simon Day, Esq., Newark.